Where do I live: growing up, neighbourhoods and environmental reform?*

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Preamble

In Primary School, once we had been instructed in the art of writing a postal address, I delighted in writing my address on the cover of one of my exercise books, as I recall my classmates doing with theirs, as follows:

> 29 Widdin Street,
> Geebung,
> Brisbane,
> Queensland,
> Australia,
> The Southern Hemisphere,
> The World,
> The Solar System …

… and so on. The fact that there was no galactic or universal postal service did not seem like a good reason to us at the time, having reached 'Queensland' or 'Australia', to abandon the attractive idea that this nested hierarchy - from familiar places to vast and largely empty spaces - signified where we lived or belonged!

In the pedagogical framework of the Queensland Primary School around 1960, 'environmental awareness' would have been an alien concept. Yet there is a hint in this children's game with addresses of such things to come, of a time when we will all be enjoined to extend, or perhaps re-establish, the boundaries of where we think we live - to see ourselves as living in a neighbourhood, as part of an eco-system, a bio-region … on 'spaceship Earth'.

Introduction: there goes the neighbourhood

A tradition of social cum environmental criticism of the settlement patterns, economic organisation and social conditions of our urbanised, industrialised, consumer society - evident now, for example, in the philosophy of social ecology (Bookchin 1993) - stretches back well into the nineteenth century. There is a recurring emphasis in this tradition on the importance of remaking local communities, economies and neighbourhoods, and a recognition that (what we now think of as) environmental problems are, in the end, social problems. One can find this emphasis in a public lecture by William Morris (1971, pp. 234-35) in 1889, titled 'How Shall We Live

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Then?', where Morris rails against the "monstrous muck heap" of the supposedly "great cities" of his day and looks forward to their demise; and one can find it in Ted Trainer's (1995) proposals for deep environmental reform of Australian suburban lifestyles and livelihoods, which would see the bulk of production and consumption shift from the control of the market to the neighbourhood.

If this tradition of utopian material thought about the reform of our burgeoning cities seems, well, utopian, or burdened with nostalgia for rural village life, let me quote that pragmatic-seeming economist (social thinker and environmentalist), the late H. C. Coombs (1990, pp. 19, 165), worrying over "the return of scarcity":

> The planning of cities, suburbs, towns and neighbourhoods could contribute much to the real income available to all their residents irrespective of income if they were conceived as locations for living which enabled human activities to be conducted simply, with minimum expensive capital equipment, and, economically, especially in relation to energy.… There are conceivable lifestyles more modest in their material demands, less destructive of the physical environment - lifestyles which are simpler, whose excitements are found primarily in the human relationships they provide scope for. The search for those lifestyles is the essential task of the rising generation. Upon their success in that search will depend the future of humankind.

I do not propose to argue or analyse the case for such reforms below, but to assume the importance of neighbourhood and community in achieving environmental sustainability in our cities (see Meltzer 1995, Bamford 1996). In the space available, I want to report and discuss one aspect of field work I undertook in 1995, in cohousing communities in Denmark and The Netherlands, in particular, *Overdrevet* and *Ottrupgård* in Denmark. My general interest in this field work was to examine what it is like to grow up in the novel socio-spatial setting of cohousing, and I look below at some evidence of how the young children think about where they live with an eye to this concern for the neighbourhood. Neighbourhoods are intentionally created in cohousing, principally for social reasons, and in a way that is at least conducive to the kind of environmental reform envisaged above.

The intentional neighbourhood: field work in two Danish cohousing communities

Cohousing attempts to secure the social advantages of a more communal life from an intentional neighbourhood without sacrificing the integrity and privacy of individual families or households. New kinds of relations *between* groups of households are thus required to achieve the former, which relations need to co-exist with conventional relations *within* households or families. Many aspects of domestic life are re-constructed (or invented) in cohousing to establish and maintain this new set of inter-household relations, of which the regular common meal is probably the most important. But there are many others, from the preference for one common laundry instead of 20 or 30 individual laundries to having a solidarity fund in a community, working bees (with a treat at the end) or a camping holiday. From the beginning, a strong motivation of the inventors of cohousing was a belief that children should be able to form relations with other adults in a neighbourhood and that neighbourhoods should be 'child-friendly' places, which ambitions are related because such adults often exercise considerable spatial power in the children's lives (McCamant and Durrett 1994, pp. 38 and 137).

Turning to the communities themselves, *Overdrevet* was built in the late 70s, *Ottrupgård* in the early 90s. Each is located on disused farming land on the edge of a village in commuting distance of a large town in Jutland. In 1995, *Overdrevet* had 30

households and more than 80 residents, slightly fewer than half of whom were children (including teenage children); *Ottrupgård* had 22 households, about 70 residents, and a similar proportion of children but they were of a much younger average age. Each community has a substantial Common house, productive communal gardens or fields (vegetables, chickens or pigs, etc.), a playing field, common indoor and outdoor play spaces for children, substantial solar and wind (*Overdrevet*) energy production facilities, and communal car parking at the edge of the site.[1]

Much more of daily life for children in cohousing is thus neighbourhood centred or extends to include neighbouring adults or children. Some observations: the chore of hosing down a large shed in *Ottrupgård*, in preparation for their 'Summer feast', turned into fun for the younger children when a fire engine turned up to do the job and successive waves of water were then swept from the shed; *Overdrevet*'s annual cross-country canoeing and camping expedition in Sweden in 1995 saw over 40 people participate, half of them children; in *Wageningen*, a former circus performer runs a 'circus school' in the Common house and the children give performances on an annual camping holiday; in *Sættedammen*, one father and son who had disparate recreational interests found they could team up with others in a similar bind and the soccer games or fishing trips could then avoid conscripts ("Life Matters" 1994); and back to *Ottrupgård* - some young girls had their regular pattern of visiting selected neighbours disrupted by the summer holidays, so they simply switched to visiting others who were still at home.

Children's drawings of where they live (and lists of favourite places)[2]

I administered a short questionnaire to parents (concerning their reasons for choosing cohousing as a place to bring up children) in which I also asked them to ask those of their children below the age of "about eleven" to do a drawing for me of where they lived ("Lav en tegn af, hvor Du bor.").[3] I visited a school and pre-school (hereafter, 'school') near one of the communities and repeated this exercise with two classes of children, with the assistance of their teachers. The phrasing of the drawing request was intended to allow a variety of appropriate subject matters, and parents and teachers were asked not direct children toward any particular subject. The whole exercise yielded 59 drawings, 24 from the children in cohousing (both sexes, aged 3 to 11) and 35 from the school children (both sexes, aged 6, 7 and 10). I also asked the cohousing children to nominate their three or four favourite places "where they live or near by".

Of the drawings done by the school children, only three were not of their house or garden.[4] Two boys drew the woods where they lived or regularly played, whilst a third drew a stream in a field at the bottom of his garden. The remainder of the school children drew their house or occasionally their room or a portion of the garden; the latter option allowed two boys to concentrate on the sporting attractions of that space. The children's houses were always dominant or centrally located on the page and typically absorbed most of their effort (see Figure 1A). Two girls employed their house and garden as a backdrop for a family portrait (one of which is reproduced in Fig. 1C). One girl included, at the edge of her drawing of her own house and garden, a strip of the neighbour's garden (clearly demarcated from hers) and populated with her two (adult) neighbours and their dog. Such attention to neighbourhood context, however, was rare.

Of the drawings done by the children in cohousing, however, about half departed from this general pattern. Figure 1 exemplifies the interesting difference between the two sets of drawings. Take the girl's drawing in Figure 1B: it is visually similar to the boy's drawing in Figure 1A (she is 5 years old, he is 7), but it is conceptually different. She lives in *Overdrevet* and her drawing of where she lives is simply of their Common house (Fig. 2A). She then indicated where she 'lived', by a letter of the alphabet beneath

her name (houses are known by letters in *Overdrevet*). Similarly, although the drawings by the two 6 year old girls in Figures 1C and 1D seem to be alike, the girl who did the latter lives in *Ottrupgård* and her portrait of (some of) her family and friends is set nearby where she 'lives' - in the common play area in the 'Big square', with its sand pit, logs, swings and seats (Fig. 3B).

Figure 1: Children's drawings - a brief comparison

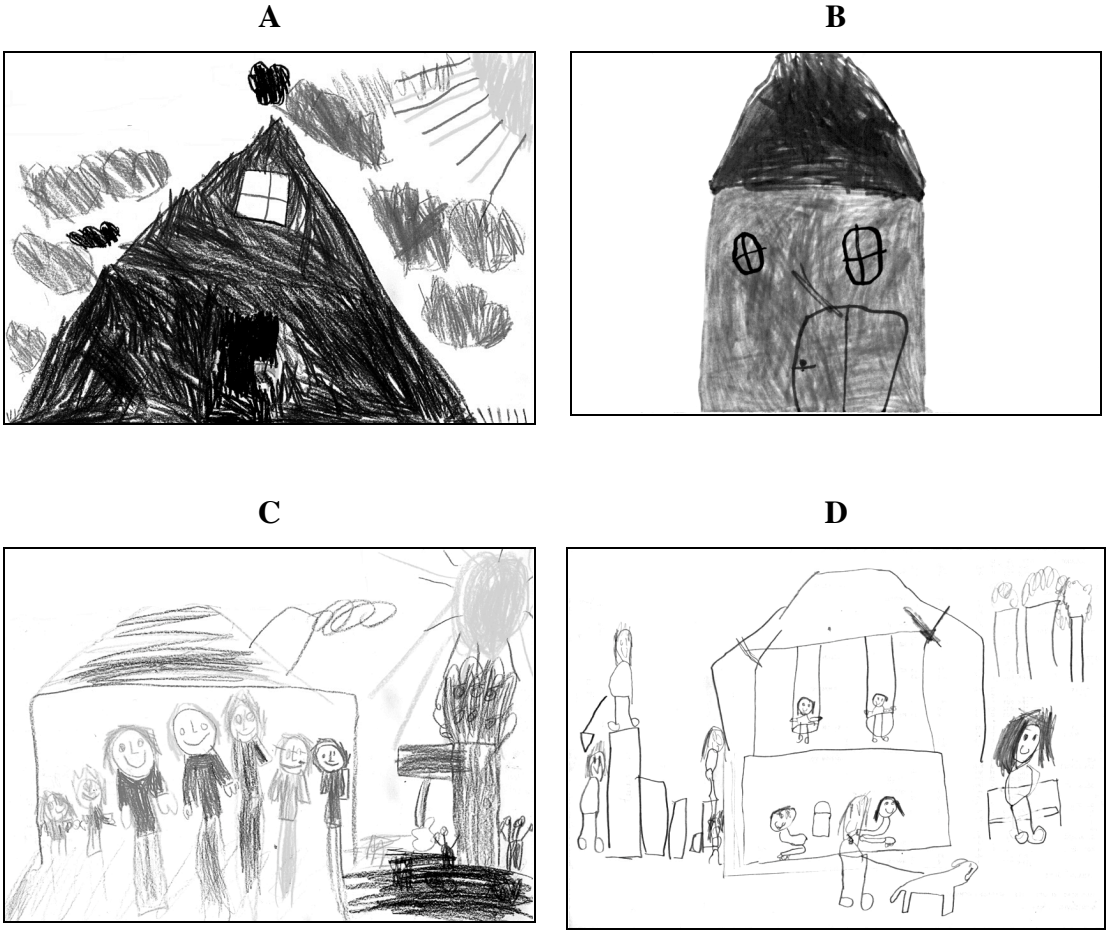


Figure 2 reproduces four drawings by children in *Overdrevet*. The 11 year old girl who did the first drawing (Fig. 2C) has chosen to include all four row houses forming her side of one of *Overdrevet*'s two courtyards. Which house is hers? Notice how large and prominent is the courtyard, and the attention she pays to the attractions this common space can hold for a child. Although too tiny to read, there is a beautifully drawn cat (on the path) and a dog (on the grass), a (child's?) wheelbarrow, rabbit hutches, and a sandpit with a girl and several buckets (bottom right); small trees, shrubs, flowers and a carefully drawn grass verge complete her drawing of this space. In Figure 2D, a 7 year old boy has imaginatively drawn a cross section of the four row houses on his side of the courtyard, indicating his familiarity with his neighbours' houses, their various rooms and items of furniture, from beds to computers. And once again, which is his house?

The 7 year old girl who did the drawing in Figure 2E depicts *Overdrevet* from the southern side, the main entry to the community. The Common house is centrally located, flanked by row houses from each courtyard; the girl and her mother are in the

foreground whilst a friend appears at an upstairs window of her (friend's) house (on the right); the house of the girl who did the drawing is in another row of houses altogether and is not shown. Lastly, in Figure 2F, an 8 year old girl has drawn the Common house (and given it this title), looking across from her house. Her neo-cubist drawing is an assemblage of views of the building and its elements: vent pipes, chimney and television antenna (top left); kitchen windows (centre); new playground on the southern side (bottom left), to the right of which is the decorative timber balustrade on the upstairs verandah (see Fig. 2A). She includes a bicycle - people park their bicycles along the northern and western sides of the Common house, and the front garden of a house in the courtyard on the other side of the Common house appears in the top right corner.

Figure 3 reproduces three drawings by *Ottrupgård* children. In Figure 3D, a 9 year old boy locates his house centrally, in the middle ground, but the house remains only one element in a detailed aerial view of the landscape (rubbing out and re-drawing is evident in the original, as he corrected details from observation). *Ottrupgård*'s 'Little square' makes up the foreground with its complex network of paths, sand pit and play equipment, grassy patches and shrubs; the next door house where his friends live fills out the left hand edge and the path to the car park between their houses is shown, along with a sign reading '*Ottrupgård*' and their house numbers; the community 'chicken garden', on the opposite side of the car park, runs along the top edge; and the Common house comes into view top right, with a sign reading 'Mad' ('food') and an arrow pointing to the door; the main path to the Common house and a minor path which slides off to the left, past the car park and chicken garden, are also shown (see Figs. 3A and 3C).

The 5 year old girl's drawing in Figure 3E features the Common house, with a giant compost bin, complete with lid and handle, beside it. (The compost bin sits outside the kitchen door and is just legible in Fig. 3A - along the wall with the prominent gable, below a small window.) A collection of birds and pet rabbits completes her drawing. Finally, the 5 year old girl's drawing in Figure 3F was the largest (A3) of the cohousing drawings, matching its subject matter. She has mapped *Ottrupgård*, employing the conventions of plan and elevation to suit (see Fig. 3C). The Common house appears in the top left-hand corner, with the path, like the tail of a mouse, that leads to her house (her cubby house is the shaded figure beside it). She lives on the edge of the Big square, which is shown on the opposite side of the path, with the play area in this square further to the right (see Fig. 3B); the two large rectangles near the bottom of the drawing are the two car parks, with two cars in one and a tree on its edge, and one (big) car in the other.

This brief comparison of a sample of the two sets of drawings provides some evidence, therefore, that one of the aims of cohousing, namely, the creation of an intentional neighbourhood, is likely to be significant in the conceptual framework of children growing up there.[5] There can be many reasons, of course, why children would respond in one way or another to such a drawing request, not the least of which is the way the request is phrased. So it is worth noting, for example, that one young girl who drew herself in her house, floating on the page, then listed her favourite places as the playing field, the chicken garden and the home of an elderly woman in the community, and she was not alone in this regard. (On the other hand, the girl whose drawing is reproduced in Fig. 1D listed her room as one of her favourite places.) Indeed, the *Ottrupgård* children often listed friends' houses (in *Ottrupgård* and occasionally elsewhere), and common spaces in *Ottrupgård* and occasionally elsewhere as their favourite places, but more often drew their own house. (As one can see from Figs. 3A

and 3B, *Ottrupgård*'s houses are detached or semi-detached, comparatively large and conform to a conventional image of a house.) So it would be a complex task to sort out children's actual socio-spatial relations with their neighbourhood, intentional or otherwise, and my aim here has been merely to suggest that a general effect one would expect of cohousing does exist.

Two final points. Firstly, one limitation of the comparative aspect of this exercise was the different conditions under which the drawings were done by the two groups of children. However, it seems unlikely that if the cohousing children had done their drawings at school, for example, the overall results would have been markedly different. Secondly, there are other interesting aspects of the cohousing drawings and lists, though my sample is too small to draw conclusions from. However, I will mention two aspects to indicate what future research might usefully explore.[6] Firstly, being an older community, *Overdrevet* has well established common spaces; its houses are typically organised in blocks of three or four, which huddle around (three sides of) the Common house; and its houses are relatively small, especially compared with the Common house. The *Overdrevet* children more often drew the common spaces or facilities, included neighbours' houses (admittedly harder to avoid), and listed friends' houses less often as favourite places. Lastly, half the girls in the combined sample listed the Common house as one of their favourite places or made it the subject or a key element in their drawing whereas it figures at most as part of a general view of the neighbourhood in a few drawings by the boys (Fig. 3D).

Concluding remarks - back home

In their survey of Sydney children aged 9 to 11, Ross Homel and Ailsa Burns (1985, p. 106) found that what the children liked about their neighbourhoods were "parks, other playspaces, friendly children and adults". Conversely, their dislikes were "lack of playmates, lack of parks and playspace … and unfriendly adults", in addition to "traffic, noise, [and] pollution". They concluded (pp. 106-107) that typical low density suburbs fared well in the children's evaluations, but that whilst these suburbs might be valued as "quiet, spacious and secure" they were also "somewhat lacking in social life", from the children's point of view. (Two outer bushland suburbs with this disadvantage had the compensation of the bushland and were most favoured - but for how long would such valuable common open space remain?).[7] It is not difficult to see why cohousing can be an attractive option where children are concerned.

Australia has traditionally distributed domestic space and resources relatively generously and equitably (Bamford 1992). Just when this is under threat, however, a new challenge is to find ways (of which cohousing can be one way) of doing the same with inter-household space and resources, in better conceived neighbourhoods. We should take up this challenge for the social and environmental reasons touched on above, as well as to protect and extend the remnants of the natural world in our cities (for the sake of the denizens of that world as much as our own). The view of the neighbourhood evident in the children's drawings or lists may be as constrained by the social organisation and property relations of the *bofællesskab* or cohousing community, as an Australian suburban child's would be by 'the Great Australian Dream', but a journey of a thousand miles begins … .

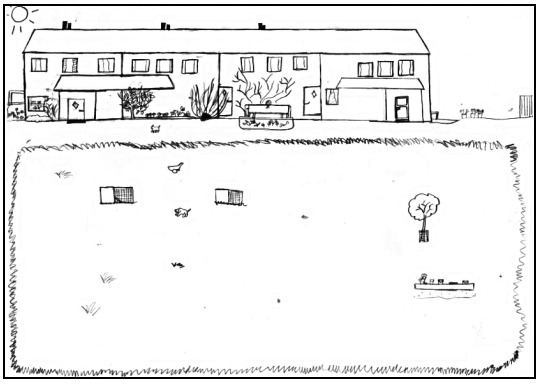
Figure 2: ***Overdrevet***

A: View from western side of one courtyard of the Common House; **B**: View across *Overdrevet*'s fields from the south-east of housing forming the other courtyard (note solar collectors blanketing the south-facing roofs of blocks of row housing); **C - F**: drawings by children (aged 7 to 11 years).

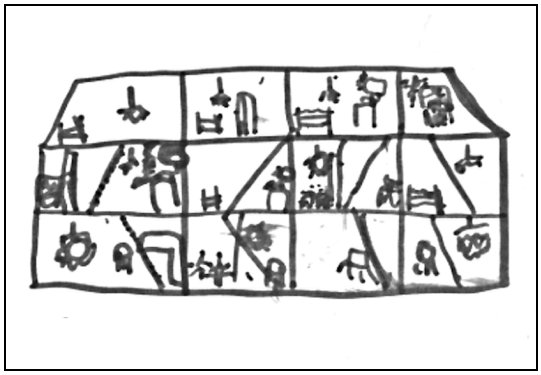
A

B

C



D



E

F

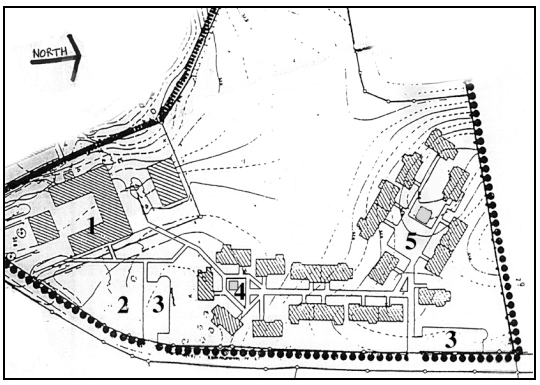
Figure 3: ***Ottrupgård***

A: View of the Common house, late in the day of the 'Summer Feast'; **B**: the 'Big square'; **C**: Site Plan: 1 - Common house; 2 - Chicken run or garden; 3 - car park; 4 - 'Little square'; 5 - 'Big square'; **D - F**: drawings by children (aged 5 to 9 years).

A

B

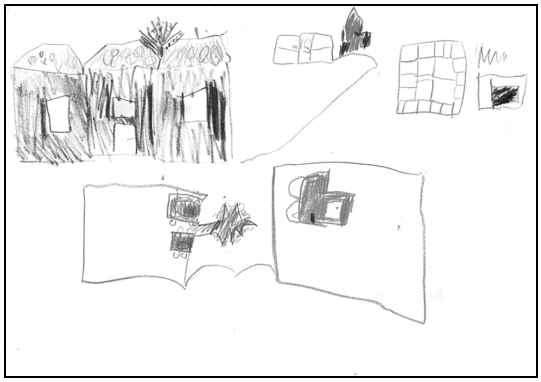
C



D

E

F



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Biography

Greg Bamford teaches design and subjects in the area of people/environment studies in Architecture at the University of Queensland.

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[1] In a previous Catalyst paper (Bamford 1995), I discuss these communities in order to criticise the unimaginative densification of Australian housing currently in vogue; see also "Overdrevet …" (1984) and McCamant and Durrett (1994, pp 63-65), although the latter provides a misleading account of *Overdrevet*, and "Life Matters" (1994).

[2] A longer version of this paper is in preparation which will include more children's' drawings and related views of the communities than would unfortunately fit here. The drawings were done in various

media, sometimes in colour and their reproduction is as faithful as possible. No drawing has been cropped, and no page was cropped except for Fig. 2D where the drawing occupies only a small portion of the original page. I asked children to put their names and ages on the drawings, but have removed these from the Figures for this first publication of the material. Photographs of the two communities were taken in 1992 (*Overdrevet*) and 1995 (*Ottrupgård*) - some minor changes to the appearance of *Overdrevet* had occurred in the interim but these photos seemed the most helpful for an appreciation of the drawings selected. The Site plan of *Ottrupgård* was supplied by the community: it has been cropped, keyed to a legend, modified to improve legibility and some paths have been redrawn to match changes either to that plan or since the paths were laid. Many thanks to the children who did the drawings, both communities for having me and Scott Henderson for his efforts with scanning and formatting.

[3] A preliminary analysis of the results suggests that the construction of the social network of the intentional neighbourhood and the values underpinning it are important considerations for parents.

[4] A fourth drawing in this category was done by a girl who lived in the cohousing community. She thus did two drawings for me, essentially the same - a minor confirmation of the uniformity of the instructions.

[5] By adult standards, a cohousing scheme is a small neighbourhood, but is it so for a child?

[6] I was also struck by the relative absence of stylised forms in their drawings, as well as their attention to detail and their observations of their environment. (It was a suitably humbling experience for me, when I queried the tree projecting above the roof of the Common house in Fig. 3F, to be reminded by the mother of the girl who did this drawing that there is indeed a tree in the central courtyard.) The task was non-compulsory for the cohousing children so I was more likely to sample the artists amongst them, of course, and no comparison with the school children's drawings is reasonable in this regard for, amongst other things, they were done away from home.

[7] These results cohere with my childhood experience. Geebung was an expanding working class outer suburb in the 50s and early 60s, with industry nearby. But with (mostly) tolerant parents, streets full of kids rather than cars, generous backyards, the space 'under the house', remnant bushland at the end of the street and a Council busily flattening bush or draining swamps (elsewhere) for parks and ovals, we enjoyed a range of 'spatial privileges', often fortuitous, which our families could not have otherwise secured for us.